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Coping with cyberbullying victimization: An exploratory study of Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Limited information is available on how victims cope with their cybervictimization experience. Therefore, using 432 cases of cyberbullying victimization (i.e., victims-only as passive victims and victim-bullies as aggressive victims) in a sample of Hong Kong school-age Chinese adolescents, this study examines the effects of different demographics (i.e., age and sex) and psychosocial characteristics (i.e., self-esteem, empathy, prosocial behavior, family attachment, perception of a harmonious school, sense of school belonging and commitment, and positive school experience and involvement) on different victim coping approaches (i.e., avoidant, aggressive, passive, and active). Findings indicate that older male adolescents who engage in prosocial behavior are likely to employ an active approach, while those who reported fewer positive school experiences and involvement are likely to use an avoidant coping style in coping with their victimization. Adolescents who perceived their school as a harmonious place but with fewer positive school experiences and involvement are likely to adopt a passive coping style, while those who retaliated against their bullying perpetrators are likely to be males and high in empathy level. Implications are offered to inform practices in aiding adolescents to cope with potential cyberbullying victimization effectively.

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1. Introduction

Most children and adolescents make use of the Internet, via smartphones and/or computers, as part of their daily routines. The Internet has becoming their important communication medium to keep in contact with one another. For instance, over 90% of European and American youth are online (e.g., Feezell et al. 2016; Livingstone et al. 2011; Taylor and Keeter, 2010). According to the data released by China Internet Network Information Center, the internet users in China have reached 649 million in 2014, with the adolescent population accounts for 54.3% of the total population of internet users (Yu et al. 2017). For most of these children and adolescents, social media such as Facebook, Twitters, WhatsApp, and other chat rooms, instant messengers, and social networking sites are an important platform in maintaining their social life. Such heavy use of the Internet, primarily on the social media, as part of their lifestyles is not uncommon among adolescents in Hong Kong. Research evidence (e.g., Fu et al. 2010; Leung, 2004; Shek et al. 2008; Yu and Shek, 2013) on the excessive and/or addictive use of the

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Internet by Hong Kong adolescents indicates the prevalence rate of Internet addiction ranged from 7% to as high as 38%. However, it should be noted that although the Internet provides numerous advantages to the young generation, it is also at the same time a powerful medium for engaging in antisocial behavior in the cyberspace.

One form of antisocial behavior on the Internet is cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is generally referred to as repeated aggressive intentional acts performed by an individual or a group, using electronic forms of contact (e.g., computers, smartphones), against a victim who cannot easily defend himself or herself (Chan and Wong, 2015a; Huang and Chou, 2010; Smith et al. 2008). The most common acts of cyberbullying are name calling, rumor spreading, and abusive comments in chat rooms, on instant messengers, and through emails (e.g., Hinduja and Patchin, 2015; Price and Dalgleish, 2010; Wong et al. 2014). Interestingly, some of these behaviors do not require high technological expertise (e.g., sending offensive texts, photos, or video clips through smartphones; Slonje et al. 2013).

The core elements of cyberbullying include repetition of behaviors, a clear intention, expected harm to the victims, and imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim (Patchin and Hinduja, 2015). In general, cyberbullying behavior can be distinguished as either overt or relational aggressive behaviors. Overt aggressive harassments are typically manifested through electronic text, such as sending abusive or threatening messages to the victim. Relational aggressive behaviors, conversely, may consist of denigration (i.e., posting embarrassing photos, rumors, or personal information on the Internet), impersonation (i.e., manipulating the victim's social relationships by sending messages to others through the victim's hacked electronic account), outing/trickery (i.e., divulging personal, sensitive, or embarrassing information that was shared in confidence in an electronic format to unintended recipients), or exclusion (i.e., purposeful barring of the victim's entrance to an online social activity; Vandebosch and van Cleemput, 2009; Willard, 2007). At its most extreme, cyberbullying can escalate into severe criminal behavior such as sexual harassment, stalking episodes, and death threats (Shariff, 2005; Spitzberg and Hoobler, 2002).

Globally, between 20% and 40% of adolescents reported to have experience being cyber-victimized (Tokunaga, 2010). The literature indicates that most cyberbullying victims are younger adolescents who aged 12–15 years, and from lower educational levels (Slonje and Smith, 2008; Walrave and Heirman, 2011). Importantly, previous studies have found that cyberbullying victimization is often associated with severe internalizing problems such as anxiety, depression, emotional distress, and suicidality (e.g., Campbell et al. 2012; Chan and Wong, 2015a; Perren et al. 2010; Schneider et al. 2012; Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004). Therefore, without timely intervention, these internalizing difficulties may subsequently lead to school disciplinary problems, school dropout, alcohol and/or drug use, and involvement in delinquent behavior (e.g., Katzer et al. 2009; Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2007; Ybarra et al. 2006).

2. Coping with cyberbullying victimization

Cyberbullying victimization is likely to lead to adverse consequences. It should be noted that negative effects of cyberbullying victimization are in part due to the coping approach employed by the victims. In fact, Völlink et al. (2013) found that ineffective coping seems to yield depression and other health complaints. Broadly speaking, coping can be described as the cognitive and behavioral efforts employed to minimize, master, or tolerate internal and external demands that are the results of stressful events (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Reactions or responses to experiences of victimization are often categorized as either problem-focused (i.e., taking steps to remove or to avoid the stressful experience, or to reduce its impact if it cannot be avoided) or emotion-focused (i.e., taking steps to minimize distress triggered by stressors; Carver and Connor-Smith, 2010; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Simply put, the coping approach could be either to focus on solving the problem or to reduce the stress associated with the problem. Moreover, there are numerous categories of coping strategies with similar underlying intentions, such as approach versus avoidance coping (Roth and Cohen, 1986) and aggressive versus passive coping (Mahady Wilton et al. 2000).

In general, an approach coping style consists of a conscious overt thought or action in response to a stressful event whereby the individual attends to the stressor in order to reduce or manage the unpleasant experience (Anshel, Kang and Miesner, 2010). Avoidance coping, conversely, involves the conscious effort to physically remove oneself from experiencing the perceived distress, to filter out unpleasant information, or to turn away from the stress source (Anshel et al., 2010). Often times, approach coping strategies are associated with positive emotional and behavioral functioning, whereas avoidant approaches are related to negative outcomes (Dempsey et al. 2000).

In terms of the passive-aggressive coping dichotomy, Mahady Wilton et al. (2000) asserted that individuals who employed a passive coping style are generally withdrawn, avoidant of conflict, and incompetent at using communication skills or other conflict management tactics to resolve their bullying victimization. They tend to submit to their bullying perpetrators (Olweus, 1994), with intention not to receive further distress initiated from the victimization. In contrast, individuals who adopted an aggressive style in coping with their victimization are described as high-conflict victims (Mahady Wilton et al., 2000). They tend to actively antagonize their perpetrators and other individuals, and will attempt to counter-attack when being bullied, as a means to deal with their feelings of distress.

The extant literature has demonstrated that the victim coping strategies are, to some extents, depend on their experience in bullying behavior (i.e., as the perpetrator or the victim of bullying behavior; Andreou, 2001; Hunter and Boyle, 2004; Skrzypiec et al. 2011). Among others, psychological characteristics that are related to cyberbullying perpetration and victimization include self-efficacy and self-esteem (Aricak et al., 2008; Lodge and Feldman, 2007; Lodge and Frydenberg, 2007), empathy (Ang and Goh, 2010), awareness (Smith et al., 2008), and self-control (Vazsonyi et al. 2012). In addition to